

THE NEW COLUMBUS

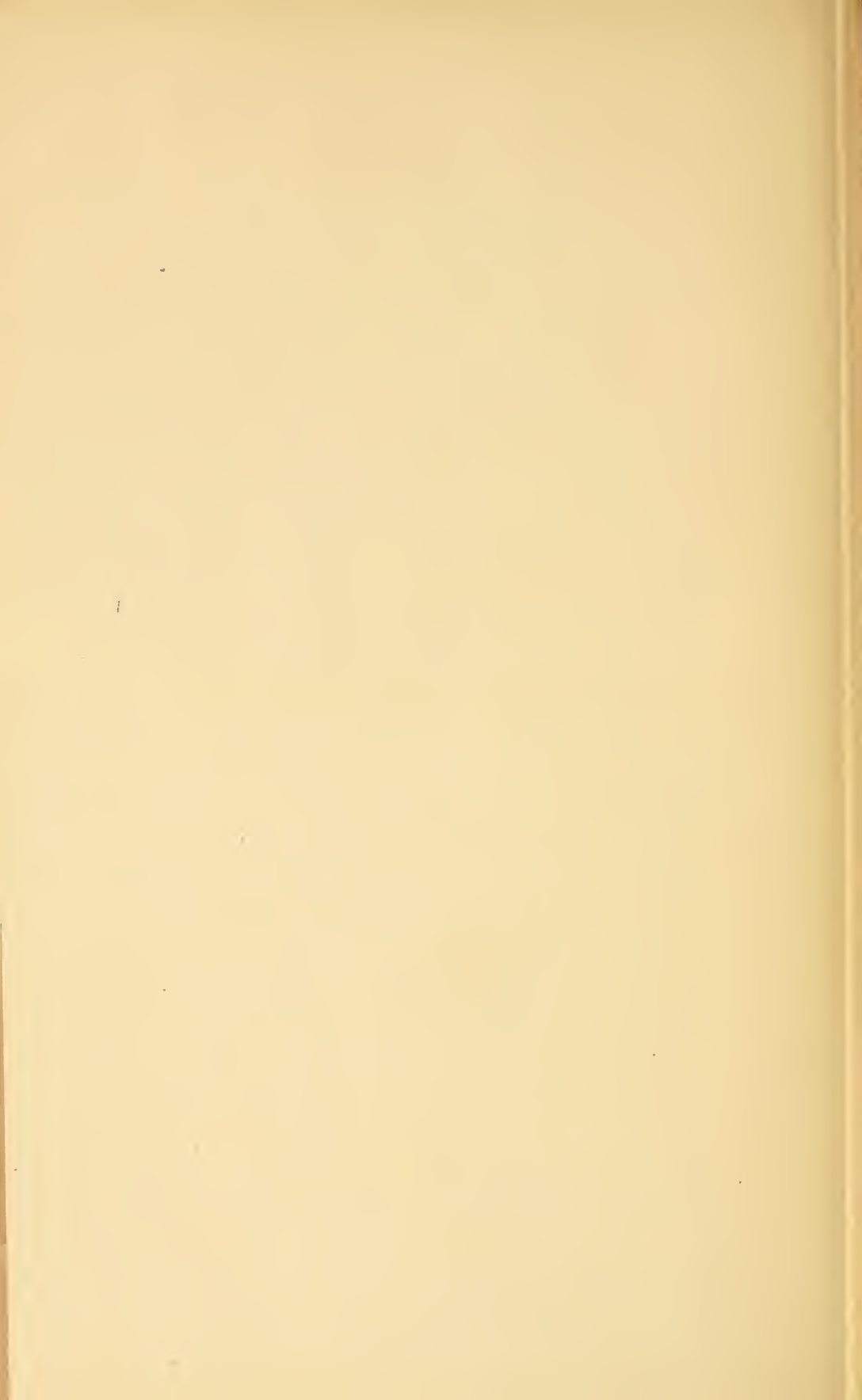
BY

HENRY P. BIGGAR

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By HENRY P. BIGGAR,
of London.

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If it be true, as Alexander von Humboldt has stated, that the biography of a man of learning is to be found in his works, equally certain is it that the life of a man of action is to be sought in his deeds. Christopher Columbus in the year 1492 discovered the New World, afterwards called America, and, whether he achieved this result by accident or of fixed purpose, thereby gained immortality. Yet as the full life of to-day with its animation and its color is reflected to-morrow merely in the stray lifeless papers that by chance escape destruction, so the story of Columbus's achievement has been handed down to posterity in a fragmentary form. Apart from the official papers drawn up before Columbus set sail, we have only the extracts of the Journal of his first voyage copied by Las Casas and two letters despatched by Columbus to friends on his return. The biography of Columbus written by his son Fernando between 1533 and 1539, the Spanish original of which has never been found, was first published in Italian at Venice in 1571, when Columbus had been dead some 65 years, and the author of his life, 32 years.

Although Washington Irving declared Fernando's life of his father to be the corner-stone of American history, the late Mr. Henry Harri-
risse, whose death on May 13, 1910, is deplored by every American scholar, sought in 1870 to prove that this volume could not possibly have been written by Fernando. Mr. Henry Vignaud, formerly first secretary of the American Embassy in Paris, has recently attempted to show, not merely that this book is full of inaccuracies but that it is composed in large part of forged documents. Mr. Vignaud, in his "*La Lettre et la carte de Toscanelli*" (Paris, 1901), maintained that the correspondence with Toscanelli preserved to us in Fernando's life was fabricated by Bartholomew. Mr. Vignaud has since published three more volumes on Columbus. In 1905 in his "*Études critiques sur la vie de Colomb*" he endeavored to prove both that the statements made by Fernando regarding his father's early life were incorrect and also that everything Columbus himself relates of his early life is untrue. Finally, in two bulky volumes, entitled "*Histoire critique de la grande entreprise de Christophe Colomb*" (Paris, 1911), Mr. Vignaud has advanced the theory that Columbus

never proposed to seek a new route to the east by way of the west; his object was merely the discovery of new islands in the Atlantic.

These theories present both the character of Columbus and also his achievement in such a different light from that in which these have hitherto been regarded that, with your permission, I shall endeavor to sketch here this new Columbus, and in conclusion shall draw attention to one or two facts which would seem to militate against a very general acceptance of Mr. Vignaud's views.

Columbus was born at Genoa in 1451. He was thus 41 years of age when he discovered America. There were no sailors in his family, nor had he any relatives of noble estate. His father was a weaver and gave his son but a rudimentary education at one of the guild schools in Genoa. Columbus never attended the University of Pavia. It is also improbable, as he asserts, that he took to sea at 14 years of age. In 1470, at the age of 19, he was a wool-comber at Genoa, where we find him still in 1472. In 1473 he was living in Savona, a suburb of Genoa, and presumably exercising the same profession of a weaver.

In September, 1475, Columbus sailed to Chio, the Genoese colony in the Levant, on board two vessels belonging to Antonio di Negro and Nicola Spinola, of Genoa. Columbus's stay at Chio lasted some months, but early in 1476 he returned to Genoa and in the summer of that year set out for England in a fleet of four galleasses, three of which belonged to his fellow-citizens, di Negro and Spinola. On August 13 off Cape St. Vincent these vessels were attacked by the French Admiral Colombo in command of some 15 French and Portuguese ships-of-war.

After an engagement lasting 10 hours, during which neither side could claim the advantage, a fire, which destroyed seven of the vessels, put an end to the fight. Fernando Columbus relates how his father, being a good swimmer, seized an oar and, having made his way safely to land, proceeded on foot to Lisbon.

Two of the vessels belonging to di Negro and Spinola, which had taken refuge at Cadiz, called at Lisbon on December 12, 1476. If Columbus visited England it was on board these ships. He never sailed to Iceland in February, 1477, as he relates, but may have reached the Faroe Islands after touching at Bristol and Galway.

Columbus returned to Portugal in the course of 1477 and, as his fellow-countrymen established in Lisbon gave him a friendly reception, he determined to settle there. In July, 1478, he was commissioned by Paulo di Negro to buy a quantity of sugar at Madeira. Columbus made contracts for the purchase of the desired amount, but on the arrival of di Negro's ship at Madeira it was discovered that she had not brought the full purchase money, in consequence of which

the bargain fell through. Columbus stated all this before a notary at Genoa in August of the following year, 1479. He added that he was then 27 years of age, had 100 florins in his pocket, and intended on the following day to return to Lisbon.

In that city it was that about this time he married Felipa Moniz, daughter of Bartholomew Perestrello, formerly governor of the island of Porto Santo. Columbus can not have lived on this island with his mother-in-law, for she resided in Lisbon. It is also impossible for her to have handed over to her son-in-law the papers and geographical notes of her dead husband, for, according to Mr. Vignaud, Perestrello never was a sailor.

As these notes are supposed to have given to Columbus his first idea of a search for land in the west, the correspondence with Toscanelli can only have taken place after Columbus's marriage in 1480 and before the death of Toscanelli at Florence in May, 1482. Mr. Vignaud, however, pronounces all these Toscanelli letters to be forgeries and sees in the Italian text of the second letter, and the Latin and Spanish texts of the first letter, merely progressive drafts of one and the same fictitious document. In the time at our disposal it is impossible to give in detail Mr. Vignaud's reasons for such a conclusion, but as this question is intimately bound up with that of Columbus's plan of the discovery of a new route to the east, on which Mr. Vignaud has much to say that is new, we shall have occasion later to refer to the origin of this correspondence.

In this year, 1482, in which Toscanelli died, the Portuguese built the fort of St. George de La Mina, 5° north of the Equator. Columbus states that he visited this fort, but places it on the Equator. He was therefore a most inaccurate scientific observer. His voyages to the West Coast of Africa, of which he frequently makes mention, must have taken place between this year, 1482, and 1484, when, as we shall see, he passed into Spain.

Columbus's conclusion from his observation of the explorations of the Portuguese along the coast of Africa was not, as Fernando would have us believe, that it was possible to reach the east by sailing to the west, but merely that since the Portuguese had found new lands by advancing toward the south, so it was possible other new lands might be discovered by sailing out into the Atlantic beyond the Cape Verde Islands. Accordingly, the design which Columbus laid before King John II of Portugal in 1483 was not that of a new route to the Spice Land of the east by way of the west, as has been supposed, but simply the discovery of new islands in the Atlantic to the west of those already known. The attempt on the part of this king to send a caravel in secret to the region indicated by Columbus shows that the latter's idea was not the discovery of a route to the east, but merely that of new lands to the west of the Cape Verde Islands.

Indignant at this behavior on the part of King John, Columbus, whose wife was then dead, left Lisbon secretly by sea and with his young son Diego sailed to Palos in Andalusia. On his way from Palos to Huelva, where lived a sister of his dead wife, Columbus called at the Franciscan convent of La Rabida. One of the monks, Antonio de Marchena, on questioning Columbus and hearing his tale became so interested that he sent him to the Duke of Medina-Sidonia at Seville. Unsuccessful with this duke, Columbus applied to the Duke of Medina-Celi, who considering the undertaking more suited to their Catholic Majesties gave him a letter to the court at Cordova. Ferdinand and Isabella after their audience with Columbus in April or May, 1486, commanded Talavera to place the matter in the hands of a commission, before whom Columbus was summoned at Salamanca in the autumn of 1486. The University of Salamanca was in no way interested in these discussions.

While waiting for the decision of the commission, Columbus on August 15, 1488, became the father of a second son, Fernando Columbus, whose mother was Beatriz Enriquez de Torquemada. This girl, whose parents were both dead, was then some 18 or 20 years of age. She was in poor circumstances and may possibly have been but a servant in a *posada* at Cordova, which would explain why Columbus never married her.

Although Columbus collected all available data regarding the existence of undiscovered land in the west and consigned this to his "Livro de Memorias" he has nowhere made mention of the reported discovery of the Antilles by an unknown pilot of Huelva, related at length by Las Casas. While Mr. Vignaud thinks it impossible to prove the authenticity of this tale, there are in his opinion many reasons for believing that a pilot was actually driven by winds and currents to one of the Antilles, and that on his death he confided the fact to Columbus. In no other way can one account for the firmness with which Columbus constantly maintained his conviction of the existence in the west of new lands. He seemed as sure of what he asserted, Las Casas tells us, as if he had already been there in person.

In 1490, after five years' deliberation, the commissioners advised the rejection of Columbus's plan, which was not the discovery of a new route to the east by way of the west, but the same that he had laid before King John of Portugal, namely, the discovery of new lands in the Atlantic to the west of the Canaries. The documents make no mention of any other project.

Before offering his plan to the King of France, Columbus proceeded to La Rabida to bring his son Diego to Cordova. He profited by his return to Palos to hold frequent converse with the sailors of that town and also with those of Moguer and of Huelva, which latter town had been the home of the unknown pilot. At Palos, Columbus was

informed by Pedro de Velasco that, from observations made at the Azores, he had concluded that land must exist further to the west. Another pilot of Palos, Pedro Vasquez de la Frontera, told Columbus that he knew the very situation in the Atlantic, beyond the great Sargasso Sea, of the Indies themselves. In this man's house Columbus met Martin Alonzo Pinzon, who had just returned from Rome, where in the pope's library he had seen a mappemonde on which lands were depicted in the west at a distance to which hitherto no sailor had penetrated.

This new and valuable information induced Juan Perez of La Rabida to demand an audience of Isabella and the latter to agree to receive Columbus again. The conditions demanded by the latter were, however, so exorbitant as to prove a fresh stumbling block. Finally, Luis de Santangel succeeded in inducing the Queen to accept them. Mr. Vignaud is the first to point out that in some copies of this agreement with Columbus the privileges granted are motivated, not by what Columbus was to discover, but according to the best texts "as some satisfaction for what he *has* discovered." Nowhere in this agreement, however, can a single reference be found to the idea of a new route to the east by way of the west. Columbus simply proposed to discover new lands in the Atlantic.

Amid the difficulties of fitting out the ships at Palos, the intervention of the Pinzons saved the situation. In Mr. Vignaud's opinion, however, Martin Pinzon alone would not have discovered America. On the other hand, Columbus would never have been able to carry out his plan, at any rate in Spain, without the active cooperation of this helpful lieutenant.

According to the instructions given by Columbus to his captains, the flotilla was to sail west from the Canaries for some 700 leagues, at which point he instructed them always to shorten sail between midnight and dawn. Columbus also gave the crews to understand that at this point land would be reached. It was because no land was seen after they had gone this distance that on October 3 the men began to show signs of mutiny. Here again Columbus had to rely on the help of Martin Pinzon. "Hang some of the mutineers," he called out to Columbus. "If you are afraid," said he, "my brothers and I will come aboard and do it for you." Pinzon declared, indeed, that he would never return to Palos without first running his prow upon the shore of the land of which they were in search.

On October 6, when they had already sailed the distance fixed by Columbus and found no land, Pinzon proposed that they should steer more to the southwest, in order to reach Cipangu, of which he had heard at Rome. The next day Columbus agreed to this course, with the result that on October 12 they sighted the island of San Salvador, some 1,100 leagues to the west of the Canaries. Mr. Vignaud thinks

that a great change now took place in Columbus's mind. Since they had sailed over 350 leagues beyond the point at which he expected to find land, Columbus concluded that he had penetrated to the outskirts of Asia. Cuba, which was sighted on October 28, was in consequence of this held to be the Asiatic mainland. On December 6 they discovered the island of Haiti, which both Columbus and Pinzon decided must be Cipangu.

On his return Columbus declared that he had found the Indies, to which point it had always been his intention to make his way. Although at first Ferdinand and Isabella accepted this statement, and in their letters described the new islands as being "in the Indies," the expression used in the official documents some two months later is "in the parts of the Indies," which expression, in Mr. Vignaud's opinion, shows that a doubt had arisen in their minds whether the new islands really were India. This doubt in time became general. Thus La Cosa, Cantino, and Canerio in their maps did not include the islands discovered by Columbus with the Indies, and Peter Martyr went even so far as to call Columbus the discoverer of a "new world." Again, had Columbus's statement that these new lands were India met with general acceptance, some trace would be found of the astonishment experienced when it was discovered that the new lands were not really India. Mr. Vignaud can find in the records no trace of the expression of any such surprise.

As the world persisted therefore in believing not only that Columbus had not discovered India, but also that he had never intended to do so, Columbus felt it incumbent upon himself to show that it had always been his intention to sail to the East. In his letters of 1498, and in that of 1503 written from Jamaica, he developed a new cosmographical system which he took from Martin Behaim whom he had met in 1491 and 1492.

As, however, on Columbus's death in 1506 the world was still unconvinced that he had intended to sail to the East, his brother Bartholomew, to save the memory of Columbus from the unjust aspersions cast upon it by those who persisted in relating the story of the anonymous pilot, had recourse to an heroic solution. He forged the whole correspondence with Toscanelli in order to prove that Columbus had always had in mind the discovery of a new route to the east. Fernando Columbus found these fictitious documents among his uncle Bartholomew's papers, and in this way they came into the hands of Las Casas, who believed them to be authentic. Mr. Vignaud's conclusion thus is, that while Columbus displayed genius in the faculty with which he sifted the evidence regarding the existence of land in the west, his real merit will always lie in this, that he discovered America not in seeking for the east by way of the west, but because he deliberately set out to find America.

In conclusion one can but call attention to a few facts which would seem to militate against a very general acceptance of Mr. Vignaud's views. If it be true as he has stated that there is not a single contemporary reference to Columbus's correspondence with Toscanelli, equally certain it is that in June, 1494, the Duke of Ferrara wrote to his ambassador in Florence requesting him to inquire of Toscanelli's nephew, who had inherited his uncle's papers, whether this nephew would be good enough to send the duke a copy of some notes, which he understood Toscanelli had written, regarding the island recently discovered by the Spaniards.

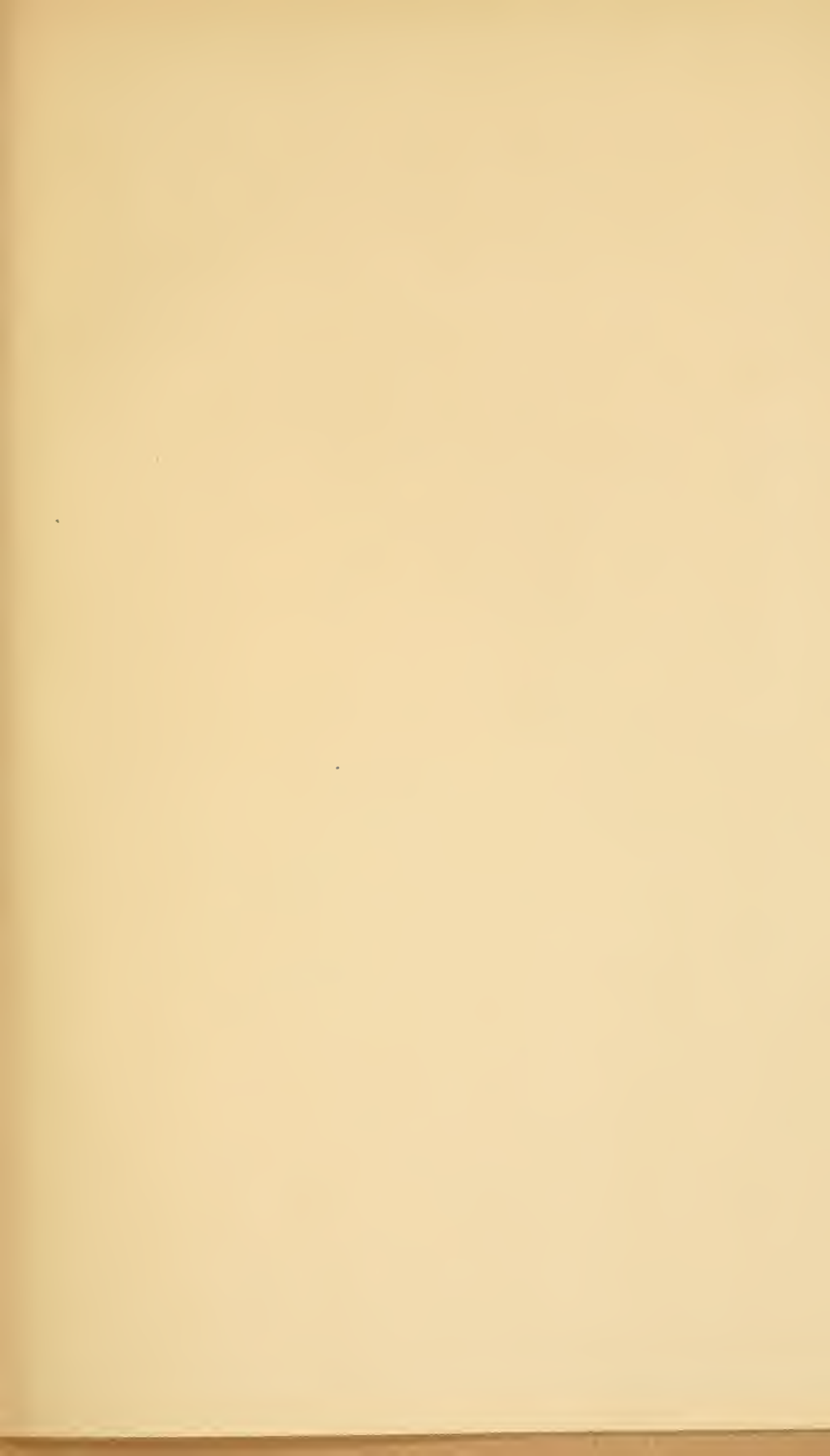
And as to the real nature of Columbus's project, we know that what he proposed to King John of Portugal was a search for the island Cipangu, and Barros tells us that when Columbus returned from his first voyage, he declared at Lisbon that this was the island he had actually discovered. Since Columbus knew from the travels of Marco Polo, which he had read, that Cipangu lay some, 1,500 miles off the coast of Asia, it would seem clear that Columbus's original intention must have been to sail to the East across the western ocean.

In proof of this we have the text of the letter of credence given to Columbus by Queen Isabella on April 30, 1492. Although the name of the prince to whom this letter was to be delivered is therein not given, Columbus in his Journal under October 23, states that this prince was the Grand Khan of Cathay. This is further apparent from the statement of Queen Isabella in this letter that "from the reports of some of our subjects, and others who have come to us from your Kingdoms and Countries, we have learned with joy, with what good feelings you are animated toward us and our State." Such a remark could never apply to the ruler of an undiscovered island in the Atlantic, but is in keeping with the supposition that this letter was intended for the Khan of Cathay. Finally, we have Columbus's introduction to the above-mentioned Journal of his first voyage, and with the first few sentences of this important document we must bring this paper to an end:

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Whereas, most Christian, most high, most excellent, and most powerful Princes, King and Queen of the Spains, in the present year of 1492 in consequence of the information which I had given to your Highnesses of the lands of India, and of a Prince who is called the Grand Khan, how that many times he and his predecessors had sent to Rome to entreat for Doctors of our Holy Faith, to instruct him in the same, and that the Holy Father never had provided him with them, and that so many people were lost, believing in idolatries, and imbibing doctrines of perdition, therefore, your Highnesses, as Catholic Christians and Princes, Lovers, and promoters of the Holy Christian Faith, determined to send me, Christopher Columbus to the said parts of India to see the said Princes and people and land, and discover the nature and disposition of them all, and the means to be taken for the conversion of them to our Holy Faith, and ordered that I should not go to the East by land by which it is the custom to go, but by a voyage to the West, by which course unto the present time we do not know for certain that anyone hath passed, Your

Highnesses therefore, after having expelled all the Jews from your Kingdom and Territories, commanded me in the same month of January to proceed with sufficient armament to the said parts of India. I departed therefore from the City of Granada on Saturday, May 12, 1492, to Palos, a seaport, where I armed three ships well calculated for such service, and sailed from that port well furnished with provisions on Friday, August 3 of the same year, half an hour before sunrise, and took the route for the Canary islands of Your Highnesses to steer my course thence and navigate until I should arrive at the Indies and deliver the Embassy of your Highnesses to those Princes.

These words, which Mr. Vignaud is obliged to declare apocryphal, though originally written for the edification and information of Ferdinand and Isabella, would seem to place beyond the shadow of a doubt the fact hitherto undisputed that Columbus discovered America merely by accident in sailing across the western ocean on a voyage to the East Indies.





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